

TRANSNATIONAL EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE TWIN-CITY OF TORNIO–HAPARANDA

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Abstract: This article concentrates on everyday life in the twin-city of Tornio–Haparanda, which is situated in the cross-border region of the Tornio River Valley between Finland and Sweden. The Tornio River Valley was divided after the Finnish War of 1809 and, until then, people spoke the same language and shared the same culture and religion. Today, the Tornio River Valley area is a frontier district where the political – or national – boundaries do not coincide with the cultural and linguistic boundaries. The multi-ethnic border zone of the Tornio River Valley is vital area for the hybridisation of cultures as well as for the study of power relations and everyday activities. The towns have many forms of co-operation in different sectors. In my ongoing research I am more interested in the everyday transnationalism which is experienced by the town dwellers.

Keywords: transnationalism cross-border region, Tornio River Valley, everyday life

Introduction

During my summer holidays, I have been trying to repair and re-paint my old red and yellow tricycle, which I got when I was two or three years old. This tricycle was the finest toy that I could ever imagine. I remember that I got it as a present when the colleague of my father brought binoculars for my father from Sweden. Binoculars and other similar kinds of devices as well as children's toys were expensive and still seldom seen in the shops of Lapland in 1960s, even though the choices of items were better than just after the war. Binoculars were an important tool in my father's work as a reindeer herder. People who were living near Sweden were used to go shopping there.

This old toy from my childhood ties me personally to my research area, the twin-city of Tornio–Haparanda¹, which is situated in the cross-border area between Finland and Sweden. The larger area is called the Tornio River Valley and, according to Ilmar Talve, it is regarded as a traditional cultural area in ethnology. In my research project the focus is on the cultural

¹ For the towns, I use the Finnish name Tornio (it is Torneå in Swedish) and the Swedish name Haparanda (it is Haaparanta in Finnish).

dimensions of everyday uses within a transnational region. In addition to transnational everyday life, my interest is also in identity construction in the twin-city area.²

In the Tornio River Valley area, as for all people living in the border regions, the spatial dimension is always present. How they use this border-area depends on, in addition to their own interests and skills, the political systems of the bordering states.³ The special character of the Tornio River Valley was described by one interviewee as having given the inhabitants wealth and prosperity for decades, even centuries: *"For us, it has been very advantageous to live here on the border. We can take advantage of both countries; we buy all sorts of goods from Sweden, depending on the value of the Swedish crown. Of course, you have to make the most of that. Even today, we go shopping both in Tornio and in Haparanda. We are used to buying some food in Sweden and some food in Finland."*⁴

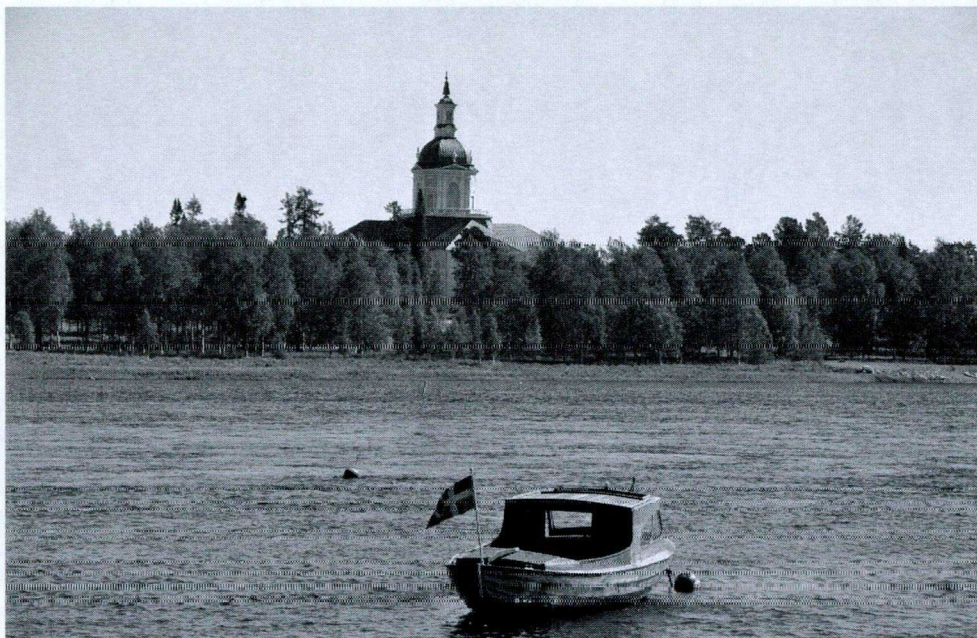


Fig. 1 The river Tornio as a border river. Finland and the church of Alatornio are in the background.
Photo: Helena Ruotsala, July 2010.

In the following, however, I will focus on the historical background of my theme. The current nature of the Tornio River Valley has been shaped by the so-called Finnish War (1808–1809). At the end of the paper, I will introduce the current situation. First, I will make two short references to how I use the concepts in my study. I understand place

² This project is funded by the Academy of Finland (SA decision No 13808).

³ LUNDÉN & ZALAMANS 2001: 33.

⁴ (female, born 1945, Sweden).

according to the definition provided by Doreen Massey: in other words, that place should not be understood only in a physical or integrated sense, as a space which is separate and stable. Instead, the concept should be combined with ideas of a meeting place in which connections, relationships, impacts and movements are intertwined.⁵ Borders are tools for organizing social space and form part of the process where places and their identities are produced.⁶ Transnational refers broadly to those multiple relationships and interactions which link people and institutions across national borders. Transnational can be spatial or geographical in scope and it can refer to networks and relations that cross long distances or penetrate the borders of autonomous units. The central and defining element is that of cultural complexity.⁷

The red ribbon drawn up by the Tsar

Until 1809, Finland was the easternmost province of the Swedish Kingdom. The Finnish War, in which Sweden was defeated and Finland became an autonomous region within the Russian Empire, resulted in the Tornio River Valley becoming a border region. After Sweden conceded Finland to Russia, the Tornio Valley area, which until now had been Finnish speaking, became isolated in a dramatic way. The Russians drew a new border along the River Tornio, not the River Kainuu, which at that time separated the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations. The Swedes wanted the border to be further east, along the River Kemijoki. Finally, the Tsar of Russia agreed that the frontier should follow the Tornio and Muonio Rivers, in such a way that the town of Tornio was on the Russian side.⁸ The peace negotiations and how the border eventually came into being at this location has been the subject of many narratives. One story tells of Russian peace negotiators who favoured a compromise, another of drunken diplomats who did not know the names of the rivers and had no idea of their relative significance. These stories are also familiar to the present inhabitants of the area, who have mentioned them, for example, in interviews.

Of course losing the war was a problem for Sweden, but, as far as everyday life at the local level is concerned, people had to pay a high price for the way in which the frontier question was resolved. The border is also called the “red ribbon drawn up by the Tsar”. The Finnish War was especially catastrophic in the north, because the loss of people was huge. Also, hunger and illnesses which the soldiers brought with them increased the number of the dead. The defeat at the end of the war was a very traumatic event for Sweden. Sweden had to surrender much of its land and population in the eastern province of its territory. Now, 200 years later, Finland and Sweden regularly meet at the government and parliamentary level and engage in an extensive cultural programme. There were also political contacts between Finland and Russia in 2009 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the settlement. Several new works had been published in Finland and a number of seminars had taken place in which scholars speculated on what might have happened if Finland did not become subject to Russian rule in 1809. Would Finland have gained its independence

⁵ (MASSEY 2002, 51–53)

⁶ (MASSEY 1995, 67–68)

⁷ (HANNERZ 1998)

⁸ (KUVAJA 2010: 354–356; LÄHTEENMÄKI 2004: 30–31.)



Fig. 2 The joint language school is one example of co-operation between Haparanda and Tornio. The school is situated in Sweden, but half of the pupils are from Finland. Photo: Helena Ruotsala, February 2010.

and, if so, when? And what would be the official status of the Finnish language today in Finland? After all, Swedish used to be the administrative and official language.⁹ So far in this discussion the main emphasis has been on political and administrative issues and Finland's entry into the international community as an independent state. Less has been said about the division of the Tornio Valley between the two states and how this has affected people's everyday lives.

The changes introduced as a result of the Finnish War and the new state border are evident on the ethnological atlas of Finland and Finnish culture. The new frontier split villages, congregations and farms, fields and forests, land ownership and families in two. The border cut the ties between kindred and neighbours and tore to shreds the old trading areas. Just as with the Hungarian–Slovakian border at Komáron–Komárno, both on the Finnish and on the Swedish side of the River Tornio there are villages with the same name, such as, for example, Kuttanen–Kuttainen and Karesuvanto–Karesuando. Almost all of the parishes in the Tornio Valley were split in two, thus causing them to lose both territory and inhabitants. Mortality rates, too, were very high at the end of the war. For instance, the dead were buried “in the soil of a foreign country” for years, since the establishing and organising of congregations and the construction of new churches on the other side of the border was a lengthy process.

At that time, the Tornio River Valley was inhabited mostly by Finnish-speaking people – and also a minority of Saami-speaking people. The boundary drawn between the

⁹ (See, for example, LAPPALAINEN ET AL 2007.)

two countries dramatically separated the Finnish-speaking area in the river valley. As I already mentioned earlier, the new border was drawn along the River Tornio, not the River Kaakamo, which separated the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations. The Tornio River Valley and the area of Northern Norway, where people with Finnish origin (the Kvens) are living, are included in the maps of Finnish Folk Culture, including those by Toivo Vuorela in 1976 and Matti Sarmela in 1994. As late as the 1980s, when I was studying ethnology in courses on Finnish peasant culture, attention was always paid to the phenomena in these areas, too. At the same time, it is interesting that no attention was paid to the culture of our minorities, the Saami and the Roma, because they were not included in the Finnish folk culture.¹⁰

Finnish language and Swedification policy

The Finnish language has survived – although with a reduced importance – in the Swedish areas of the Tornio River Valley until the present day, although those left on the western side of the frontier suddenly became a small Finnish-speaking minority in the Kingdom of Sweden. From the end of the 1800s, the Finnish-speaking inhabitants on the Swedish side became the subject of a fierce policy of Swedification. The speaking of Finnish was viewed as a threat and Finnish-speakers as a “foreign tribe”. Finnish was rooted out by ruthless means. The Finnish language had a low value and children were later ashamed of it. One person born in a village near Haparanda in the 1950s told that, in the annual report of the school, lists of pupils were published and, if the pupil could speak Finnish, F was written after the name. According to him, it was much finer if the letter F was missing.

The Swedification policy has recently been the subject of many autobiographical writings and has, for example, been mentioned in the film directed by Klaus Härö, *Invisible Elina* (2002), and in the popular novel by Mikael Niemi, *Popular music from Vittula* (2000). Two important reasons for why the Finnish language survived were that it was used as *lingua sacra* in the Laestadian Movement and that it was used in cross-border marriages where the mother came from Finland.

Despite the Swedification policy and the various constraints, contacts and dealings with those left on the other side of the frontier continued to take place. The common language, religion and relatives, along with the old contacts, were the key factors which helped people maintain diverse and active connections. The local inhabitants refused to accept the border as a divisive frontier; rather, they emphasised the common history, language and culture:

“And that goes for these nations, because this wasn’t the frontier then. Yes, because you were sister, brother to someone on the other side, to many, the contacts were enormous, it wasn’t thought of as a border. [...] But, for us, Finnish is the mother tongue, even though we are proper Swedes, but our mother tongue has been Finnish, yes. But we learn Swedish in school.”¹¹

¹⁰ (RUOTSALA 2010: 178.)

¹¹ (TYKL/kk/ 2113, male born 1943, Sweden)

Today, the Finnish spoken on the Swedish side of Tornio River Valley is regarded as a language of its own language, not only as a dialect. It even has its own grammar. This "ethnic mobilization" is quite a new phenomenon, which began after the 1980s. Here, however, I do not have the space to focus on that phenomenon.

Border crossings

Overall, people living on both sides of the frontier have used different border strategies and have pursued different cross-border activities at different times. There have also been "border migrants". Marriages across the state borders, or "crossover marriages", and various forms of legal and illegal trade and employment in the other state have continued for a long time. The ties, contacts, relatives, friends and marriages across the border had a strategic meaning during the Second World War, when all inhabitants of Lapland had to be evacuated – a great number of them to Sweden – because of the German troops who left Lapland after the war and destroyed everything in their path. Also after the war, during the so-called re-construction period, this area played an important role because things which were not possible to get in Finland, for example building material, tools and especially coffee, were smuggled over the border. Local knowledge was important for this activity. The binoculars and children's bicycle which I mentioned in the beginning of this article are representative examples of things which were brought from Sweden to Finland. During the post-war period, the Finnish side of the Tornio River Valley was wealthier than other parts of the country. This can be seen, for example, in the building culture.

Smuggling has existed as long as there have been customs duties and other border controls and restrictions systems. Cross-border regulations are essential to smuggling because smugglers exploit the national borders and contest the national laws and systems. According to Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, smuggling is a "subversive economy", by which they mean that smuggling activities "threaten to subvert state institutions by compromising the ability of these institutions to control their self-defined domain".¹² Smuggling is an informal economy, which meant for local people that it was an important survival strategy. It is also an economy in which the power of the state to control the activities and movements of local citizens and to impose morality is changed. Smuggling has not totally disappeared, but today's local articles are snuff (tobacco) and fuel oil.

The most significant changes in people's lives began to be seen later in the 1800s when the state began to regulate trade and the border traffic more than ever and it became forbidden to cross the frontier, other than at certain customs posts. In 1824, those crossing the border were required to show a passport, without which travellers would be forced to return to their own side of the border. Even after the introduction of the passport regulation, it was still common for people to travel across the border and inhabitants were threatened with arrest and confiscation of belongings. At this time also, the means of livelihood began gradually to diversify. Actually later, only during the first and second world wars border crossing was regulated, although only at special sites – in addition to customs – it was allowed. The border crossings have gradually, step-by-step, become less monitored. *"The last step was*

¹² DONNAN – WILSON 1999: 88, 101.

the European Union; until that time we had to wait and see if the customs officer is waving or not [if he wanted to control the goods or not]"¹³ as one informant told it.

Today, the Tornio River Valley area is a frontier district where the political – or national – boundaries do not coincide with the cultural and linguistic boundaries. The multi-ethnic border zone of the Tornio River Valley gives evidence of being a vital area for the hybridisation of cultures as well as for studying power relations and everyday activities. A Finnish-speaking population arrived after the Middle Ages and joined the indigenous Saami inhabitants already living there. Until the end of the Finnish War in 1809, the Tornio River Valley was a cultural and ecological entity in which the same languages were spoken, membership was in the same evangelical movement, that of Laestadianism, and a living was earned from the same forms of livelihood – fishing, cattle herding and commerce. Furthermore, many of the features of the material and physical culture gave evidence of a long common history and numerous contacts. In considering this cultural area, Ilmar Talve (1979: 407) argues that the Tornio River Valley clearly formed a unique distinctive territory to be set apart the rest of northern Finland. For example, the colourfully painted peasant furniture is one cultural feature of this area and the special storehouses with three floors are another. The River Tornio, which continues upstream as the River Muonio, was a uniting factor holding the area together. The river offered a route along which people, ideas and commercial goods traversed. Also later, according to my interviews, the Tornio River valley was an area where people got in touch with novelties. For example, the youth culture, pop music, clothes and a new way of life "entered" northern Finland from Sweden through the Tornio River Valley. Swedish radio and television programmes and youth magazines were sources of this new way of life. A couple born in 1960s discussed it together in the following manner:

HUSBAND: I think it [Sweden] was in many issues before us.

WIFE: Yes, and we bought stuff there; do you remember, when there was a music shop, people bought all their records there.

HUSBAND: Oh yes, the music. Music came before from there. Yes, so was it.

WIFE: When everything came from there, yes, all the records came from there before they came here to Finland. We also bought all our videos there, too.

[...] We have also hired all our films there first and bought clothes from Sweden because the trends, styles are there always earlier [than in Finland].¹⁴

In spite of the new national border, life and contacts between the local people on both sides of the Tornio River Valley continued because, in the beginning, the border was only an administrative measure. The effect of the Finnish War on the lives of people living in the border area now began to be also apparent here in the River Tornio Valley. The activities and trading interests of the population in the area, which they had known earlier, began to be monitored and regulated. But on the human level, the place which people had previously shared together was divided into two different places of meaning after the state institutions and symbols in-

¹³ (male, born 1949)

¹⁴ (woman, born 1968, male born 1966, Tornio.)

creased and got more power. On both sides of the border people created and shaped their own narratives about the border, narratives which were “about us” and “about them”.¹⁵

In practical life it can be said that the border still defines a great part of the economic and social relationships in the area. It is visible in the everyday practices of the local inhabitants who live on both sides of the border. It can be regarded as one type of everyday nationalism, or banal nationalism, as Michael Billig calls it.¹⁶ The national ideology is present in the invisible practices and discourses of everyday life. It is important to know the narratives and experiences of the people living on the border because the border as an activity environment can mean different things for different groups. The cultural and linguistic unity does not necessarily or automatically refer to a shared regional identity and shared identity narratives. For example, in Tornio–Haparanda, the differences based on nationality, ethnicity or linguistic group exist and, on the everyday level, the differences are made according to these shared regional identities and identity narratives. These are also questions which are essential in my field work.

The twin-city of Tornio–Haparanda today

Today, Tornio River Valley is a transnational and multi-ethnic borderland, wherein several languages are spoken: Finnish, Swedish, Saami and meänkieli, a local variant of Finnish which is also called “torniolaakson suomi”, the Finnish of the Tornio River Valley; the latter name can be regarded as less political than “meänkieli”, which literally means “our language”. This area is composed of five different groups of people: Tornio Valley inhabitants, Finland Finns, Sweden Swedes, Sweden Finns and Saami, who live in both countries. However, Saami and Finnish have been the indigenous languages here. For example, Haparanda became a retirement community for Finnish emigrants moving from southern Sweden closer to their former native country in order to benefit from the Swedish retirement plan and Finnish language services. Today, a small number of immigrants, refugees, and foreign students are also living in the area.

Tornio–Haparanda has together a population of 32 600 inhabitants. The town of Tornio has 22 400 inhabitants and Haparanda a population of 10 200. Haparanda, in which 74.6 per cent of the inhabitants have a Finnish background,¹⁷ is at present Sweden’s largest Finnish-speaking municipality, in which about 60 per cent are proficient in Finnish, the majority belonging to the older age groups.¹⁸ According to the Swedish Statistical Central Office, the share of Finnish speakers in Haparanda in 2008 was 66 per cent. Tornio also has a very tiny minority of Swedish speakers. Now these two border cities make up a significant and exceptional area because of the close cross-border cooperation and municipal services that exist between them.

Everyday life in the cross-border area of Tornio–Haparanda does not refer only to shopping where the goods and housing are cheaper, but also to a larger and more concrete way of transnational living. Today, approximately 3.7 million private cars, 18 000 buses

¹⁵ (See, for example, PROKKOLA 2005: 180.)

¹⁶ Michael BILLIG (1995: 6)

¹⁷ This group includes those born in Finland, those who have at least one parent born in Finland and those who have at least one grandparent born in Finland.

¹⁸ (SCB 2008/ SR Sisuradio.)



Fig. 3 The project “On the borders” is building the towns together. Sweden on the left side.
Photo: Helena Ruotsala, May 2010.

and 10–12 million people cross the border every year. The transnational mobility is broader and people are crossing the border after work, school, and daycare and to go home or pursue free-time activities. For example, you can live in one country and have your children in daycare or in school in the other country.

The municipalities of Tornio in Finland and Haparanda in Sweden have for years, since before joining the European Union, carried out diverse co-operative and joint projects across the national borders. In the beginning of the 1960s administrative co-operation was based on personal contacts, but afterwards co-operation expanded. In the 1970s an agreement for a joint sewage treatment plant and an agreement for free school attendance in complementary schools over the border were established. In the 1980s a joint waste dump was agreed upon. These examples of earlier co-operation are significant on international and national level.

In 1987 these two cities decided to formalise their cooperation by creating the cross-border association, “Provincia Bothniensis”, and in 2006 they acquired a joint name and logo, “Tornio–Haparanda”. The “Provincia Bothniensis” structure has the role of coordinating co-operation on a political level, preparing joint projects and representing the two communities at the international level. This co-operation is equally supported at a regional and national level, but it has no legal status.

Examples of these borderless services during the last decades include co-operation in cultural and leisure-time activities and education. Co-operation and joint investments in

fire and rescue services as well as common health networks and tourist agencies must also be mentioned. These few examples represent a narrow picture of the previous transnational integration, which increased after both countries joined the European Union in 1995.

On the macro level, the three “big” decisions are often emphasised, which are in the background of the current integration of the borders: the steel fabric of Outokumpu in the 1960s, which was founded in Tornio, the membership of Finland and Sweden in EU, which began in 1995, and the founding of the IKEA-warehouse, which is one important symbol of development and investment. The opening of IKEA took place in November 2006 and the store has been successful at attracting customers from as far away as Norway and Russia. Now, thanks to the weak Swedish crown, the economy on the Swedish side is booming. But the changes in currency and its impact on border trade have always been a fact of life in the border area.

As a symbol of the new “borderless Europe”, a development plan called “Rajalla – på Gränsen” (which means “on the border” in both languages) was introduced in 2002. It includes plans to build a joint city-centre and square. Already, based on these examples, it is possible to come to the conclusion that transnational integration in the Tornio River Valley is strong, although it has also met with opposition, especially on the Swedish side of the border. Sweden organised a referendum for the Border-project, but at that time it was rejected by the majority of voters in Haparanda. In spite of the resistance, the first phases of the plan have been realised and the construction work on a concrete twin-city has begun. Now, cross-border co-operation has been recognized and more appreciated, and it is motivated by financial support from EU-sources and local interdependency. It is also important to notice that the “On the border” project has gained both national and international attention and visibility.¹⁹

In my study, my aim is to focus on the cultural dimensions of everyday practices in a transnational region. I have mentioned some transnational processes at the macro level, but in my field work I will focus on the micro level and try to locate the narratives of border inhabitants. Co-operation between the towns of Tornio and Haparanda has an impact on peoples’ everyday life. Human activities place demands on the co-operation between towns and states and it is important to solve the practical problems which have an impact on the everyday life of the commuters. These are, for example, questions regarding pensions, taxes and commuting over border. In addition to the practical questions, I am also interested in the identity discourses. How transnational is their life and what are the reasons for that? How do they construct their own sense of place and identity? How do they make – if they make – differences between nationalities, ethnicities, languages or cultures? What meanings do people give to or produce along the border? How are these meanings constructed and deconstructed? The narratives and descriptions can be understood as social practices that create and maintain borders. So, by studying the narratives it is possible to study how people continuously make differences between “our own places” and “their places”. Or do they? Anyway, in terms of sports – at least according to the fieldwork I have done until now – people do notice a difference if a Finnish or a Swedish athlete is competing. There

¹⁹ See, for example, HÄKLI 2009: 213–217.

is, however, one interesting exception in sports, namely that of the team HT-Bandy, which is bandy at the highest level in the Swedish league. The sports club is shared by both Tornio and Haparanda, although the arena is situated on the Swedish side of the border. The players are from Finland and Sweden and they are cheering in three languages, in Swedish, Finnish and the local dialect of “Finnish of the Tornio River Valley”.

In my on-going study, my aim and challenge is to find and hear the multiple voices in the narratives on these transnational phenomena that consist of social formations and cultural practices which transcend nation-state borders. Sports comprise one aspect of this transnationalism.

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* Fieldwork material is archived in the TYKL archive (Archives of the Turku University Ethnological Department): TYKL/kk/2093–2117.

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